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# Building Teams from a Distance

## Abstract

[Excerpt] Virtual teams are comprised of individuals that are separated geographically or organizationally and that rely primarily on technology to complete tasks (Powell, Piccoli & Ives, 2004). This work arrangement has been found to be advantageous for many firms because it reduces the costs and time associated with employee travel. It also permits organizations to attract and retain top talent because workplace flexibility is increasingly seen as a crucial aspect of job satisfaction for many employees (Bergiel, Bergiel & Balsmeier, 2008).

Virtual teams are also valuable to many businesses because team members commonly focus their interests on tasks instead of shared social or cultural environments, which often impact the dynamic within conventional teams (Hamilton & Scandura, 2003). This fosters a working environment that encourages innovation and decreases discrimination by hierarchy, employee impairments, race or age because productivity is more important than other characteristics (Bergiel et al., 2008). While virtual teams have many advantages, they frequently struggle to establish a strong sense of trust between individuals, frequent team member intercommunication, and effective leadership; all of which are necessary for team success.

## Keywords

teams, team members, job satisfaction, employee engagement, engagement, workplace flexibility, innovation, social environment, culture, culture environment, virtual teams, trust, communication, personal investment, virtual meeting, norms, rules, videoconference, virtual interaction, technology, technology training, conventional teams, technology, team leader, lessons learned, feedback, non-conventional, team building, managing teams

## Comments

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## BUILDING TEAMS FROM A DISTANCE

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### **Virtual Team Advantages**

Virtual teams are comprised of individuals that are separated geographically or organizationally and that rely primarily on technology to complete tasks (Powell, Piccoli & Ives, 2004). This work arrangement has been found to be advantageous for many firms because it reduces the costs and time associated with employee travel. It also permits organizations to attract and retain top talent because workplace flexibility is increasingly seen as a crucial aspect of job satisfaction for many employees (Bergiel, Bergiel & Balsmeier, 2008).

Virtual teams are also valuable to many businesses because team members commonly focus their interests on tasks instead of shared social or cultural environments, which often impact the dynamic within conventional teams (Hamilton & Scandura, 2003). This fosters a working environment that encourages innovation and decreases discrimination by hierarchy, employee impairments, race or age because productivity is more important than other characteristics (Bergiel et al., 2008). While virtual teams have many advantages, they frequently struggle to establish a strong sense of trust between individuals, frequent team member intercommunication, and effective leadership; all of which are necessary for team success.

### **Building Trust**

Establishing trust is a crucial component of a cohesive virtual team. Trust is often difficult to achieve because many teams are assembled for a short period of time to complete specific tasks (Powell et al., 2004). Creating trust within a team is frequently done through face-to-face interactions among team members that take place early in the team's life span. These encounters have been found to be effective in allowing team members to socialize, build rapport with other individuals, and increase understanding of the team's purpose (Handy, 1999).

At Lincoln Financial, one virtual team manager related that when his team does have the opportunity for face-to-face interactions, they plan meals and activities together. The team's dinners and paintball outing created personal bonding opportunities that have improved trust within the team. The manager believes this is because the meals and activities have allowed the interactions between team members to become less formal and more personal. With stronger relationships within the team, the manager has been able to communicate more easily with team members because a personal connection and personal investment in each individual has already been established (Linkow, 2008).

In-person interactions are also important because they can contribute or accelerate the creation of “swift trust.” Many virtual teams experience this as a result of the perceived integrity of other individuals, reliable and continuous communication, and effective leadership early in the project lifecycle (Powell et al., 2004). If established, swift trust can significantly benefit the group so that virtual meetings have more robust participation of team members and subsequent virtual meetings are more task related and less social.

The level of trust between individuals in virtual teams can often be identified and enabled by the frequency and the length of emails sent between members (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). Virtual team members that communicate task related information most frequently and in shorter, more digestible emails have been shown to have stronger working relationships and experience higher levels of trust than employees that communicate less frequently and with more text. Virtual teams that experience high levels of trust between team members often have improved team member awareness and experience improved project outcomes (Hart & McLeod, 2003).

### **Virtual Team Norms and Rules**

Established norms, such as the number of emails sent to other team members in a given time period, dictates how the virtual team functions. Virtual communication norms can develop over time or be developed by the team upfront. Well-established norms are crucial to virtual team efficiency and success (DeSanctis & Monge, 1999). This is because norms give team members a framework in which to work with others.

At MetLife, one virtual team manager established consistency in his weekly virtual team meetings by reviewing accomplishments and identifying problems that could impede project progress at the beginning of each meeting. This time was also structured to allow team members the opportunity to raise project issues. By establishing this routine in virtual meetings, team members communicated their needs, received support from one another and were up-to-date on the project progress by the end of each meeting. Hosting the meeting via videoconference once a month was also integral in building strong relationships among team members, which were cited as a critical component of the team’s success (Linkow, 2008).

Additionally, teaching members how to use technology and the appropriate etiquette for virtual interaction is important for establishing a positive team environment and ensuring tasks meet the highest standards. Without verbal or physical cues, communication and comprehension can often be difficult for team members. Learning to express personal emotions and comprehend others’ emotions virtually takes time (Hamilton & Scandura, 2003). Cultural differences can also exacerbate these challenges through misinterpretation and miscommunication. These factors should be considered when constructing and managing virtual teams.

Virtual teams must also address the challenges that inherently arise when members reside in multiple time zones. Establishing team meeting ground rules before virtual team tasks have been administered has been shown to mitigate many problems and misunderstandings between team

members. These rules include: circulating agendas in advance of meetings, respecting sleep and family schedules of all team members, discussing language abilities and ensuring the importance of attendance during meetings (Linkow, 2008). Instituting and adhering to these rules can make the difference between a successful and unsuccessful virtual team.

### **Virtual Team Member Training**

Technology training for virtual team members is another critical aspect of building a successful team. Communication methods within virtual teams have been found to make them significantly more susceptible to miscommunication than conventional teams (Bergiel et al., 2008). As a result, offering introductory technology training courses and easy access to additional training is crucial for implementing the technology used by virtual teams. Team failures in multiple organizations have often been attributed to insufficient funding spent on training members to use programs and applications needed to communicate and complete their work.

To promote increased understanding of virtual teams and proper technology utilization, Nortel created an intranet page that included organizational best practices among virtual team leaders and members. This page provided a framework for a formal infrastructure that was later implemented within Nortel so that members of virtual teams would have clear guidelines as to how to communicate and initiate team processes virtually (Duarte & Snyder, 2006). This was done in tandem with significant company investments in new technologies that helped to ease the process of collaborating with team members virtually.

The process of building effective virtual teams often requires special training of the team leader. Providing a learning webpage for new virtual leaders to share knowledge with veterans in real-time has proven to be effective as well. At NASA, project managers have access to a “lessons learned” repository, where virtual team leaders can ask questions and get help from other virtual team leaders, creating an active knowledge center to improve leadership and facilitation practices (Duarte & Snyder, 2006).

These resources can be especially valuable for virtual leaders that are learning to give feedback through non-conventional methods, coach team members virtually and employ all effective technology mediums for the team. Taking action when team members’ behaviors are undesirable is also difficult for many virtual team leaders (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). Failure to follow through on these issues, however, can be interpreted by some individuals as condoning poor performance of other team members and providing insufficient developmental feedback. This can directly impact team morale and motivation levels, resulting in a poor project outcome.

### **Team Building**

Building a successful virtual team typically requires the support of the CEO and other executives. At American Express, the belief among senior leaders is that “promoting and supporting” virtual teams must come from the top (Duarte & Snyder, 2006). Besides this support and trust, building an

effective virtual team also requires navigation through many challenges. Cultural differences, time zones, language barriers and other factors should be taken in account before building a team. Adjustments and adaptations in team communication methods should be made to appropriately cater to all team members (Linkow, 2008). Leaders should play a proactive role in leading the team by adjusting to the unique needs of the individuals.

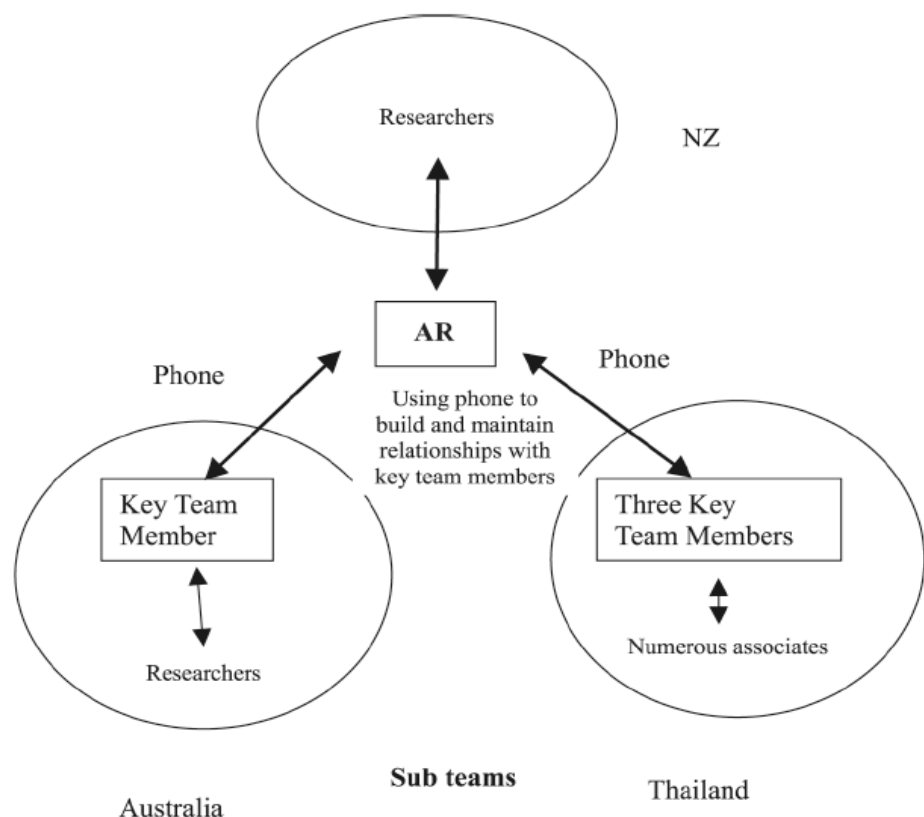
Once ensured that each member is trained on all the technologies utilized by the virtual team, leaders can assign tasks that will lead to the strengthening of relationships between members. This happens most frequently through collaboration, where one team member approaches another member for assistance on a specific task (Hart & McLeod, 2003). Ensuring time is allotted for teams to interact in this manner encourages stronger interpersonal relationships and a more effective virtual team. Many effective team leaders also prompt participants to contribute to the conversation during virtual update meetings (Dube & Pare, 2001). This can develop trust because team members can see the interdependencies among their contributions and the impact of their contributions on the project outcome.

In one large virtual team, the team leader paired some individual members with key team members, with whom she corresponded regularly. This created a “hub structure of three sub teams,” which resulted in a process by which individual contributors were able to frequently and effectively communicate issues with one another and their team leader. This improved team cohesion and trust among the hub workers as well as created opportunities for the team leaders of these sub groups to communicate important issues to the primary team leader. This method positively impacted motivation levels of the group and was a successful model for building an effective team (Pauleen, 2003).

### Hub Virtual Team Model

(Pauleen, 2003).

Hub structure developed by AR to manage her virtual team



Time is another critical component in limiting differences seen in the socio-emotional processes of virtual team members. Disparities among members are less frequently seen in conventional teams because meetings are often face-to-face and members adjust simultaneously. However, there is increased variation seen in virtual teams because time to complete projects is frequently compressed and not all team members adjust emotionally in short periods or at the same rate (Powell et al., 2004). Team members should be aware of these differences and demonstrate patience as their teammates progress through these processes.

## **Conclusion**

While it is evident that there are many difficulties associated with building and managing effective virtual teams, they are becoming more prevalent within organizations (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). Navigating through these challenges successfully requires commitment from all team members. The most effective virtual teams have established high levels of trust, consistent task related communication between team members, strong team leadership and dedication to completing the tasks at hand.

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## Annotated Bibliography

**Bell, B. S., & Kozlowski, S. W. (2002). A typology of virtual teams: implication for effective leadership. *Group and Organization Management*, 27 (10), 14-49**

**Abstract:** As the nature of work in today's organizations becomes more complex, dynamic, and global, there has been increasing emphasis on distributed, "virtual" teams as organizing units of work. Despite their growing prevalence, relatively little is known about this new form of work unit. The purpose of this article is to present a theoretical framework to focus research toward understanding virtual teams and identifying implications for effective leadership. The authors focus on delineating the dimensions of a typology to characterize different types of virtual teams. First, the authors distinguish virtual teams from conventional teams to identify where current knowledge applies and new research needs exist. Second, the authors distinguish among different types of virtual teams, considering the critical role of task complexity in determining the underlying characteristics of virtual teams and leadership challenges the different types entail. Propositions addressing leadership implications for the effective management of virtual teams are proposed and discussed.

**Bergiel, B., Bergiel, E., and Balsmeier, P. (2008). Nature of virtual teams: a summary of their advantages and disadvantages. *Management Research News*, 31(2), 99-110. Retrieved from Business Source Complete database.**

**Abstract:** Many of the elements that constitute successful face-to-face teams are also necessary for successful virtual teams. The key factors of success include:

- High levels of trust.
- Clear communication.
- Strong leadership.
- Appropriate levels of technology.

Nevertheless, virtual teams face certain obstacles, which can hinder high-level performance. Such barriers to success include:

- Multiple time zones.
- Language.
- Different approaches to conflict resolution.
- The failure or breakdown of trust, communication, leadership

**DeSanctis, G., and Monge, P. (1999). Communication Processes for Virtual Organizations. *Organizational Science*, 10(6), 693-703.**

**Abstract:** Communication is fundamental to any form of organizing but is preeminent in virtual organizations. Virtual organizations are characterized by (a) highly dynamic processes, (b) contractual relationships among entities, (c) edgeless, permeable boundaries, and (d) reconfigurable structures. Relative to more traditional settings, communication processes that

occur in virtual contexts are expected to be rapid, customized, temporary, greater in volume, more formal, and more relationship-based. To glean insight into communication processes for virtual organizations, we draw on the rich body of literature on synchronous and asynchronous electronic organizational communication. The vast set of empirical findings regarding mediated communication can foreshadow how communication will change as firms "go virtual." Six areas of electronic communication research provide implications for the major aspects of virtual organization design: (1) communication volume and efficiency, (2) message understanding, (3) virtual tasks, (4) lateral communication, (5) norms of technology use, and (6) evolutionary effects.

**Duarte, D. L., & Snyder, N. T. (2006). *Mastering Virtual Teams*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.**

**Abstract:** In today's business environment, organizations adapt quickly or die. Gaining competitive advantage in a global environment means continually reshaping the organization to maximize strengths, address threats, and increase speed. The use of teams has become a common way of doing this. The formation of teams can draw talent quickly from different functions, locations, and organizations. The goal is to leverage intellectual capital and apply it as quickly as possible. The methods that organizations use to manage this process can mean the difference between success and failure.

**Dubé, L., & Paré, G. (2001). Global virtual teams. *Communications of the ACM*, 44(12), 71-73.**

**Abstract:** Global Virtual Team leaders should:

- Understand any cultural biases they may hold and how they may impact one's decision-making and thought processes;
- Develop a cultural training program for team members regarding factors that could influence team performance (such as time zone differences, norms, behaviors, decision-making, participation, and conflict resolution); and
- Create operational terms that may affect group performance to form common understanding of all members.

**Hamilton, B.A., & Scandura, T. A. (2003). E-Mentoring: Implications for Organizational Learning and Development in a Wired World. *Organizational Dynamics*, 31(4), 388-402.**

**Abstract:** Lack of assertiveness, inadequate social skills, fear of distortion of approach, and low comfort levels have all been found to limit the initiation of mentoring relationships. Traditionally these factors play a central role in face-to-face interactions. One who is not assertive and is lacking social skills may fear approaching others, especially those who hold higher rank. Research on Internet-based networks has found that feelings of belonging and support exist based on shared interests rather than shared social characteristics.

**Handy, C. (1999). Trust and the Virtual Organization. *Harvard Business Review*, 73(3), 40-50.**

**Abstract:** Effectively managing people we do not physically see is best done through trust. However, instilling trust without face-to-face contact is exceedingly difficult. With higher levels of virtual communication taking place within organizations, efforts should be made to ensure that face-to-face contact still occurs.

**Hart, R. K., & McLeod, P. L. (2003). Rethinking team building in geographically dispersed teams: One message at a time. *Organizational Dynamics*, 31, 352-361.**

**Abstract:** Given the importance of relationships in all teams, including geographically dispersed teams, how do work associates develop strong relationships when they are separated by time and space? What is the role of leaders in the development of these relationships in virtual teams? We address these questions here by offering a set of four lessons about leadership in geographically dispersed teams, drawn from what we learned after studying such teams in the field.

**Jarvenpaa, S. L., & Leidner, D. E. (1999). Communication and Trust in Global Virtual Teams. *Organization Science*, 10 (6), 791-815.**

**Abstract:** This paper explores the challenges of creating and maintaining trust in a global virtual team whose members transcend time, space, and culture. These challenges are highlighted by integrating recent literature on work teams, computer-mediated communication groups, cross-cultural communication, interpersonal and organizational trust. To explore these challenges empirically, we report on a series of descriptive case studies on global virtual teams whose members were separated by location and culture, were challenged by a common collaborative project, and for whom the only economically and practically viable communication medium was asynchronous and synchronous computer-mediated communication. The results suggest that global virtual teams may experience a form of swift trust but such trust appears to be very fragile and temporal. The study raises a number of issues to be explored and debated by future research. Pragmatically, the study describes communication behaviors that might facilitate trust in global virtual teams.

**Linkow, P. (2008). Meeting the Challenges of Dispersed Workforce: Managing Across Language, Culture, Time and Location. *The Conference Board*, R-1432-08-RR, 1-43.**

**Abstract:** The Conference Board established the Research Working Group on Managing Distant Workforce to explore the organization, managerial, and individual challenges of managing across different languages, cultures, time zones and locations and to identify effective approaches for addressing those challenges. Managers at five companies were surveyed and a small number of interviews and focus groups were conducted with high performing distance managers and their teams.

**Pauleen, D. (2003) Leadership in a global virtual team: an action learning approach. *Leadership and Organizational Development Journal*, 24 (3), 153-162.**

**Abstract:** This paper presents an action learning-based case study investigating how one virtual team leader coped with a number of issues associated with the completion of a critical organizational task in a virtual environment. Exploring this one virtual team leader's experiences and strategies opens a window for both practitioners and researchers. The insights shared by the team leader may lead to practical virtual team leadership strategies as well as avenues to research into virtual team leadership. The paper concludes with a discussion highlighting the important practical lessons learned about virtual team leadership and implications for practitioners and researchers.

**Piccoli, G., Powell, A., & Ives, B. (2004). Virtual teams: A Review of Current Literature and Directions for Future Research. *Database for Advances in Information Systems*, 35, 6-36.**

**Abstract:** Information technology is providing the infrastructure necessary to support the development of new organizational forms. Virtual teams represent one such organizational form, one that could revolutionize the workplace and provide organizations with unprecedented levels of flexibility and responsiveness. As the technological infrastructure necessary to support virtual teams is now readily available, further research on the range of issues surrounding virtual teams is required if we are to learn how to manage them effectively. While the findings of team research in the traditional environment may provide useful pointers, the idiosyncratic structural and contextual issues surrounding virtual teams call for specific research attention.